

Parashat Vayakel 5776, 2016:

The Transformative Nature of Shabbat

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheil, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, David ben Elazar Yehoshua, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* begins with the construction of the *Mishkan* (the portable Desert Sanctuary):

“Moses called the whole community of the children of Israel to assemble, and he said to them: ‘These are the things that the L-rd commanded to make.’” (This, and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) Following this verse, one would expect the Torah to list the details inherent in the construction of the *Mishkan*. This is the case, for example, in the beginning of Parashat Terumah:

The L-rd spoke to Moses saying: Speak to the children of Israel, and have them take for Me an offering; from every person whose heart inspires him to generosity, you shall take My offering. And this is the offering that you shall take from them: gold, silver, and copper; blue, purple, and crimson wool; linen and goat hair; ram skins dyed red, tachash skins, and acacia wood; oil for lighting, spices for the anointing oil and for the incense; shoham stones and filling stones for the ephod and for the choshen. And they shall make Me a sanctuary and I will dwell in their midst according to all that I show you, the pattern of the *Mishkan* and the pattern of all its vessels; and so shall you do. (*Sefer Shemot* 25:1-9)

Our *parasha*, however, deviates from the above approach. Instead of presenting the constitutive elements of the *Mishkan* and how it is to be designed and assembled, the Torah discusses the sanctity of Shabbat and the specific proscription of igniting a fire on this most holy of all days:

Six days work may be done, but on the seventh day you shall have sanctity, a day of complete rest to the L-rd; whoever performs work thereon [on this day] shall be put to

death. You shall not kindle fire in any of your dwelling places on the Sabbath day. (*Sefer Shemot* 35:2-3)

Rashi (1040-1105), basing himself upon the *Mechilta*, the halachic *Midrash* to *Sefer Shemot*, explains why these seemingly incongruous *pasukim* (verses) were included at this juncture: “**Six days**: He [Moses] prefaced [the discussion of the details of] the work of the *Mishkan* with the warning to keep the Sabbath, denoting that it [i.e., the work of the *Mishkan*] does not supersede the Sabbath.” The Torah, therefore, is teaching us the ultimate holiness of Shabbat. Even the construction of Hashem’s dwelling place on earth must cease at the onset of this most consecrated day.

Everyone encounters Shabbat and its *kedushah* (holiness) in a different way. Each of us has a favorite time. For some, it is the Friday evening meal that is preceded by *Lecha Dodi* in Shul, and ushered in with the singing of *Shalom Aleichem* and *Aishet Chail*. For others, it is the morning *Tefilah* (Prayer) service in the synagogue, replete with the Torah reading and followed by the second meal. Personally, I am most profoundly affected by the final meal of the day, *Seudah Shlishit*. Many of our Sages have noted that this is the last bastion of *kedushah* that separates us from our weekday activities and their uncertainties. Speaking very personally, it is the time when I most strongly feel the *neshamah yitarah* (the extra soul) that the holiness of Shabbat bestows upon each of us. As such, the singing of *Mizmor l’Dovid* (*A Song of David*) and *Yedid Nefesh* (*Beloved of My Soul*), in conjunction with *divrei Torah* (words of Torah), often transports me to the highest heights that I am able to achieve during my subjective Shabbat experience. In some very powerful ways, these are transformative and majestic moments that help me reconnect to *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*.

Many have suggested that the singing of *Mizmor l'Dovid* during *Seudah Shlishit* captures the essence of the ideal Jewish religious experience. The psalm speaks of peace, serenity, and inner calm:

A song of David. The L-rd is my shepherd; I shall not want. He causes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul; He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Even when I walk in the valley of darkness, I will fear no evil for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff-they comfort me. You set a table before me in the presence of my adversaries; You anointed my head with oil; my cup overflows. May only goodness and kindness pursue me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the L-rd for length of days. (*Sefer Tehillim* 23)

My rebbi and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his students and followers, in his seminal essay entitled *Ish HaHalacha* (*Halakhic Man*, 1944), depicted the following relationship that obtains between *Seudah Shlishit* and Psalm 23:

...it is true that during the third Sabbath meal at dusk, as the day of rest declines and man's soul yearns for its Creator and is afraid to depart from the realm of holiness whose name is Sabbath, into the dark and frightening, secular workaday week, we sing the psalm “The L-rd is my shepherd; I shall not want, He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; He leadeth me beside the still waters (Ps. 23), etc. etc., and we believe with our entire hearts in the word of the psalmist. (*Halakhic Man*, translation, Lawrence Kaplan, footnote 4, page 142)

In the Rav's analysis, however, “...this psalm only describes the ultimate destination of *homo religiosus* (religious man), not the path leading to that destination.” For Rabbi Soloveitchik, Judaism “...is not, at the outset, a refuge of grace and mercy for the despondent and desperate, an enchanted stream for crushed spirits, but a raging, clamorous torrent of man's consciousness with all its crises, pangs and torments.” He explicitly urges us to understand that the path leading to peace and serenity “... is not the royal road, but a narrow, twisting footway that threads its course along the steep mountain slope, as the terrible abyss yawns at the traveler's feet.” Judaism, when

approached with spiritual and intellectual honesty, helps one navigate: "...the straits of inner oppositions, and incongruities, spiritual doubts and uncertainties" of life. The individual: " ... cries out of the depths of a psyche rent with antinomies and contradictions, out of the bottomless pit of a soul that struggles with its own torments..." Life, for the thinking religious Jew, is, therefore a trial-filled journey replete with the innumerable challenges of a searching soul. Little wonder then, that we long for the inner peace portrayed by the psalmist, a peace that is most closely approximated on the holy Shabbat, when we are free to focus upon our spiritual growth and yearning for closeness to Hashem.

May we be *zocheh* (merit) to experience the holiness and life-transforming potential of Shabbat, and thereby move closer to the ultimate harmony we long to achieve. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

They may also be found on YUTorah.org using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha's name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email rdb718@gmail.com.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on "*Tefilah: Haskafah and Analysis*," may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.